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The Humanities Course at the University of New Hampshire

It is an irony that the general education courses in the humanities which have been appearing in liberal arts curriculums during the last decade or more should be achieving their first maturity in the highly mechanized and militarized post-war America. These courses were born of protest against the dominance of science, training, and over-specialization, back in the thirties. Those years, though in some ways gentler than our own times, were sufficiently mechanical and philistine to appall the academic purveyors of the fine arts. The late war has shifted the machine age into even higher gear, and the grim prophecy of Samuel Butler and H. G. Wells that the machine, if not guided and controlled by social and humane forces, might destroy civilization is now the concern of responsible men everywhere. Among these, fortunately, are not a few teachers of literature and the arts, and some of them have seen in the humanities courses an opportunity to bring home to more and more students the need to supplement science with art, power with service to people, speed with intelligent direction. Hence these courses are most timely, and their place in general education should become increasingly important.

Even more assuring than this conviction of teachers and administration is the genuine response of students. Here at University of New Hampshire the course in humanities has grown rapidly chiefly because the students are genuinely hungry for the things of the spirit. The course is not required, and is merely one of about twenty courses, any one of which satisfies a certain group requirement. And yet in the four years of its existence, the enrollment has jumped from 25 to about 125, in spite of a number of curricular restrictions.

The history of the courses is significant. At a moment of academic lull during the war when the liberal arts faculty had more leisure and fewer students than usual, we spent some very fruitful hours re-examining the educational philosophy of the college. Out of this soul-searching came a new, or at least a definite, philosophy, embodied in Sixteen Points. Prominent in this newly formulated philosophy is faith

in the values of general education. Although no general college was established here, as at the University of Chicago, the University of Florida, and elsewhere, to teach general introductory courses, the general education philosophy substantially affected such existing courses as elementary biology.

The Humanities Division of the college (Arts, English, Language, Music, Philosophy) was particularly interested in doing something about general education. In the fall of 1945 the Humanities Division, through a committee established for the purpose, asked me to write and conduct a general education course to be called Humanities 1-2. The course was to be under the supervision of the committee rather than of a department. About twenty-five somewhat superior students consented to be experimented upon. Other teachers in the division, or even beyond it, were to be asked to provide lectures and other aids. Our theory was to enlist the specialist in each subject touched upon, wherever available, and to leave it to the instructor in the classroom in the course to relate the lectures to the outside reading. Thus lectures, readings, and study of art and music were to be given some organic unity.

This has been done. A single section has been expanded to three, each with a different instructor. All sections meet together for the weekly lecture.

When the Humanities course was introduced four years ago, it was supported and observed with enthusiasm by its sponsor, the Humanities Division, and was regarded with suspicion and occasionally hostility by other forces on the campus. It was considered, for instance, impractical. "This institution has no room for arcadian courses," snorted one very conservative member of the faculty. Or superficial. "You could get it all out of an encyclopedia," insisted another. Or academically softening. "In my day," warned a professor of chemistry, "we got our culture with difficulty. Now you would spoon feed our younger people."

It is not my purpose here to answer these charges. They may be partly justified. If it is "arcadian" to study Plato's Republic, we are guilty, though we spend little time grazing on the pastoral landscapes, either literally or figuratively. That the course could be gleaned from an encyclopedia, I admit without a blush.

So could many other courses. In fact, so could many college degrees, including not a few advanced degrees. And finally, the humanities course is guilty of being a softening influence if it is softening to gather together, for the student's benefit — and ease, if you will — materials that might otherwise seem unrelated.

This point — the relationship of the ideas, works of art or philosophy that we attempt to present — is the crucial one, and introduces the most important question needing an answer. It was asked, quite pertinently, by an administrative officer: "This humanities course of yours," he said in a tolerant but also a puzzled manner, "what's it all about? What holds it together?"

I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night in a fearful sweat, with the awful suspicion that *nothing* does. But let it not be said that we have no scheme for holding it together. The first words the student meets in the mimeographed syllabus of the course are these:

Humanities 1-2 is a general introduction to the philosophy, literature, and art of Western civilization. The course is "general" in that it does not pretend to dwell long or exhaustively on any one phase, period, figure, or achievement. It is introductory in that it presupposes no special knowledge in the student and attempts to open up new fields of interest rather than to be definitive or conclusive. The course is not a survey, even though it proceeds historically. A rough but sufficient unity is achieved through concentration upon a few of the great ideas or flowerings of art that give Western culture both its character and its direction. Therefore the student need not be disturbed by the many obvious gaps which occur between early Greek art and the trends of our own day.

One sentence of this introduction supplies the key to the type of unity we are after. "A rough unity is achieved through concentration upon a few of the great ideas or flowerings of art that give Western culture both its character and its direction." In other words, we attempt to give the course the type of unity implied in the culture itself that we are studying: the basic ideas, impulses, or artistic methods which have developed — in infinite variety, of course — in the culture of which we are a part,

and, to some extent, in any culture whatsoever. The course has as much unity as this suggests, and perhaps no more. Two examples will perhaps clarify the point:

Early in the course we study that important Aristotelian fragment, the *Poetics*, in which certain fundamental ideas having to do with the philosophy of art are presented: the principle of dramatic catharsis, the dramatic unities, the definition of the tragic action, the definition of art as imitation. Now, these principles are applied not only to the Greek plays which we study concurrently, but also to later plays, epics, novels, indeed to other arts. In fact our principal lecturer on art very early introduces the imitative principle as formulated by Aristotle, whose philosophy followed the main current of Greek thought and art. He goes on to illustrate how this principle tends to dominate Western art until the mid-nineteenth century, when painting, as well as other arts, began the search for new gods. Thus does one document — itself a great work — provide various frames of reference for the analysis and appreciation of other great contributions to one culture.

A second illustration might be taken from another work encountered early in the course which provides useful ideas throughout. A most interesting and controversial section of Plato's *Republic* deals with his castigation of the poets, and his sentencing of them to exile from the ideal state. To the student this is a shocker, coming from Plato, who is himself a poet, and raises the problem of the relationship of the artist to his society — his responsibility. If he has one, to his culture. This matter comes up over and over again. Indeed this year it led to a student inspired panel on the place of the artist in society, sponsored by a campus organization, at which three contributors to the course argued fiercely to the delight of a lively and participative audience.

These two examples should illustrate two points on which I should like to insist: First, that the course is not without form. Second, that the unity thus provided is not strict, neat, or final — and should not be, any more than the form of the varied culture which it attempts to present.

Our culture, indeed, is such a rich one that there is a temptation to throw into the syllabus (Continued on Page 4)

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Dear Editor:

May I, at this late date, get
into the dog-fight between Mr.
Leary and Miss Watts over the
"harmless necessary cat" grammar
in the freshman composition
course?

I am one of those many English
teachers who, as Mr. Leary
points out, learned what grammar
they know after they began
to teach. I am still learning it,
and like most elementary students
I detest the stuff. Furthermore,
whenever I encounter a
study of actual grammar, like
Marckwardt and Walcott's *Facts
About Current English Usage* (or
for that matter read any book
or magazine), I am led to wonder
whether when I teach textbook
grammar I am teaching anything
that actually exists.

But oh! the time I've had trying
to teach ideas! In various courses
at various schools I have struggled
with semantic ideas, ideas of
democracy, ideas about college
life, ideas in essays by Matthew
Arnold, Thomas or Aldous Huxley,
the late Justice Frank Murphy (I
never could make out
what he was trying to say, but
possibly my students did), and

the ideas of Lord Bacon. I was
therefore much interested in
Marius Risley's letter in the
September Critic, although when
we read "Of Revenge" we did
not have a recording of *Medea*
to go with it.

I think that my experience
with ideas must have been about
like Mr. Risley's. The students
read about them and let them
eddy about their ears or in their
minds. Then they sat down to
write about them and produced
something like what Mr. Risley
quotes (is it with approval?):
"Revenge is not helpful to the
peace of mind that is required
for healthful and happy living."
Plenty of that sort of thing has
gone over my desk, to the enrichment
of the makers of theme paper. And I have had "student's
reactions" like another example
from Mr. Risley: "If I had any
attraction for revenge before,
certainly the case of *Medea* has
convinced me..." In my first batch
of themes I found an unforgettable
picture of man-crazy locomotives: "I have always had a
fascination for trains".

Contact with ideas, even Bacon's, seems not necessarily to
produce skill in prose. Drill in
grammar does not make a student
write intelligently, although it
may enable him to conceal
some of his deficiencies in back-
ground. And it won't help him to
like "English". (If only the
business or mathematics depart-
ments would teach freshman
composition, Shakespeare and
Milton would suffer less of a load
of unpopularity). But certain
mechanical conventions (spelling,
punctuation, agreement of sub-
ject and verb, the connection of
c'auses with what they modify)
are of help to a student in re-
vising and proof reading his writ-
ten work, and if these are to be
covered in some 90 hours of fresh-
man English (assuming the math
teachers refuse to take over),
there is only a very little room
for philosophy, ethics, political
science, educational psychology,
and art.

But I wish a phonograph record
could teach grammar for me.

George P. Winship, Jr.
King College

Teaching Great Films

The history and aesthetics of
the motion pictures constitute
a course in the Department of
English at Purdue University.
Called "The Art of the Motion
Pictures," it is built around an
anthology of films selected to
illustrate the rise of the motion
pictures as an art and the work

of some of its outstanding di-
rectors and to lead to an under-
standing of the cinematic way
of telling a story. Materials also
include several plays and novels.

About twenty-five films are
studied from the screen during
the semester. Arranged chrono-
logically, these include Edwin S.
Porter's *The Great Train Rob-
bery*, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth
of a Nation* and *Intolerance*,
Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of
Dr. Caligari*, James Cruze's *The
Covered Wagon*, Sergei Eisen-
stein's *Potemkin* and *Ivan the
Terrible*, Roaui Walsh's *What
Price Glory*, Clarence Brown's
Anna Christie, John Ford's *The
Informer* and *The Grapes of
Wrath*, Alfred Hitchcock's *The
39 Steps*, and Noel Coward's
Brief Encounter. In addition,
students are assigned three or
four films as they happen to be
shown from time to time in the
Lafayette theatres. The plays
include John Howard Lawson's
Roger Bloomer, Eugene O'Neill's
The Emporer Jones, *The Hairy
Ape*, and *Anna Christie*, Ander-
son and Stallings' *What Price
Glory*, and Noel Coward's *Still
Life*; and the novels, Frank Nor-
ris's *McTeague*, Liam O'Flaherty's
The Informer, and John Stein-
beck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.
Comparisons and contrasts are
made in the various ways of
telling a story, not to see what
a film as an adaptation of a play
or a novel has left out or put
in, but to understand what dif-
ferentiates the dramatic from the
cinematic and the epic from the
cinematic and makes each an
independent form of narration.

Films for classroom use are
limited to those available in 16
mm., because for small groups
35mm. films are too expensive
to rent and impracticable to
screen. Thanks primarily to the
Museum of Modern Art in New
York, it is possible to obtain films
for courses such as the one at
Purdue. But although many 16
mm. films have been made for
"visual aids" in education, 16
mm. prints of films for study of
the motion pictures themselves
are comparatively few. While
director of the Motion Picture
Producers and Distributors of
America, Mr. Will Hays declared:
"Recognition of the motion pictures
as an art by the great universities,
[will mark] the begin-
ning of a new day in motion
picture work. It [will pave] the
way for the motion picture's
Shakespeares." But the produc-
ers and distributors are appar-
ently not interested.

A. R. Fulton
Purdue University

Hamlet and the G. I.

Once upon a time there was a
young fellow named Joe, a uni-
versity student with pretty good
prospects. When he heard about
the sneak attack at Pearl Harbor
it made him furious, and he en-
listed right away. But he was far
from happy about the situation.
It was no fault of his that the
world was in a mess, and he re-
sented the fate that had set him
to clean it up. Sometimes he
wondered if he wasn't being
sucked in by a lot of propaganda
put out by sinister powers. He had
plenty of personal worries too.
Like a lot of other Joes, he had
girl trouble and family trouble,
and of course the whole war sit-
uation had thrown up a road
block in the way of his career.
Sometimes he even felt so low
that he wanted to die. Fortunately
he had a buddy he could tell his
troubles to, but a couple of other
fellows he had grown up with let
him down pretty badly. In spite
of all this he was man enough
to know what his duty was, and
sometimes he blamed himself bitterly
for his low morale and wonder-
ed if he was just a coward afraid
to face the music.

But in some ways things got
better. The training began to
toughen him up, and some camp
theatricals he directed gave his
morale a lift. He felt better about
his personal problems after he
blew his top a couple of times,
once to his mother and once to
his girl friend's brother. After that
he seemed to be able to keep his
mind on his job a little better.

He gained a good command of
his weapons, and before he saw
major action he got into some
preliminary skirmishes, where he

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handled himself pretty well and learned how he could fight best. It seems he was what the boxers call a counter-puncher and always did best when he waited for the other fellow to make the first move—then Joe would let him have it. Before Joe came up to the big battle he had got used to both the thought and the fact of death. He no longer had any moral scruples about the necessary killing, and he didn't worry about getting killed himself. He acquired a sort of fatalistic attitude and said that death would come when it would come. He felt that he was ready.

When the big test came, he really proved that he was ready. Although he lost his life through enemy treachery, he accomplished his mission one hundred per cent and got a good citation.

The bearing of this naive little narrative will be sufficiently obvious to readers familiar with *Hamlet*. Its purposes are two. First, it offers a way of making a connection between literature and the students' own experience, especially in classes containing veterans. The fastidious critic will see a grave danger of carrying the analogy too far, but such scruples should not be allowed to inhibit a class discussion: the instructor can readily make necessary deductions or corrections of emphasis when he sums up the matter, and the discussion gains zest from suggestions which even their makers know are too far-fetched to be taken seriously. For example, ex-soldiers will recall their grunting and sweating under a weary life in basic training and the insolence their patient merit had to take from unworthy shavetails, and they will be amused to note that these phrases apply even more literally to the G. I. than they do to Hamlet. They may also point out that Hamlet, like the G. I., did a lot of griping and hated the guts of the high brass (meaning Polonius and the King). Although this idea disturbs the logic of the analogy by confounding the high brass with the enemy, there is no great need to worry as long as the essential empathetic process is promoted. (After all, many a G. I. hated the brass and the enemy with just about equal fervor). Regardless of what side-issues the students may introduce, the important things are: (1) that they should "feel in" with Hamlet at the end of Act I when he says,

(2) that they should understand the factors which add to the tragic burden; and (3) that they should appreciate and accept the change that has taken place in Hamlet when he can say in V, ii, "if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all". With this as a basis, each teacher can elaborate after what flourishes his native will.

The second function of the analogy is to throw a little light on Hamlet's delay. I have not the hardihood to put it forward as a solution for this vexatious problem (though it can be assimilated with some of the existing theories and is no more ridiculous than some of the others), but at least it provides an approach which is comprehensible to mid-twentieth century students and is uncluttered by psychological technicalities; and it does much to keep the practical-minded student from losing all patience and sympathy with Hamlet because he does not get on more promptly with his killing. Perhaps an escape from the moth-eaten delay argument, rather than a solution of it, is what the G. I. parallel primarily provides. It suggests that the basic problem of *Hamlet* may be not why the hero delayed but how he managed to progress from "O cursed spite" to "the readiness is all". If our analogy does not completely explain that change, at least it helps to make it believable. To a civilian, at least,

how Hamlet got himself practically and psychologically ready to kill the King is no more mysterious than how a lot of resentful, disillusioned, and unmilitaristic American boys were turned into something that could whip the German war machine and capture Iwo Jima.

J. B. Douds,
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cursed spite
That ever I was born to set
it right!

The Humanities Course

Continued from Page 1) more material than can be taught substantially. With each year's revision of the course — and we rewrite our syllabus each year — comes the same dilemma: How to add new matter without tossing out old. This past year we wedged in *The Republic* and *The Social Contract*, *in toto*, without substantial eliminations. But there is a limit to that sort of extension. We have succeeded in extending the course to four hours for next year, but it still carries only three credits; so that our demand on students must be properly limited.

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problem has been to eliminate modern and contemporary art, ideas, and readings. A similar course at another institution terminates with the mid-eighteenth century. But this solution, it seems to me, is unwise. Important as is the tradition, the student must come to grips with his own world. I believe that we in the humanities need to beware of our own tendency to rest in tradition, at the expense of our sympathy with the philosophy, art, and literature which are teeming today. Now, it is clear that an important way to learn to appreciate the modern is to know the ancient. And we by no means neglect the tradition in our course. But too often we in languages especially never get to the contemporary. In our literature courses we are lucky to get down to Balzac or Browning or Emerson. And in guiding our students to the best of the past, we have abandoned them to flounder in the worst of the present. Of course a taste for "the best that has been thought and said" should lead them to what is valuable today. But our civilization since the mid-nineteenth century has taken a revolutionary turn, and the student who feels at home with Beethoven, Goethe, or Wordsworth may, without some instruction and stimulus from us, be left ignorant or intolerant of Picasso, Shostakovich, or James Joyce. Hence, at the risk of uttering artistic judgments which will not turn out to be monumental, we should, I think, present the contemporary.

In a course like humanities the teacher's attitude toward his subject is, I believe, the key to success or failure. This is for a clear reason: the fine arts are man's most intimate expression. It is the very coloring of personality and subjective view of life that differentiate the arts from science. Hence the point of view from which the teacher presents a poem, a painting, or a musical experiment does much to establish the student's attitude toward the work. The instructor has an unusual responsibility, in our field, to be enthusiastic without being opinionated, just but not too calculating, wise without being complacent.

Particularly to be avoided in the teaching of the fine arts is the creation of snobs. Always on the fringe of the true artists and the true appreciators are the poseurs and members of cliques. The dilettante is the worst type of philistine; he seeks through aesthetic a sense of superiority and caste, rather than seeing art, as Tolstoy observed, as the most deeply socializing force in the world. Young students, unless guided, are not above making this error.

We in the humanities course try to avoid this pitfall by cul-

tivating in our students a healthy open-mindedness. The introduction in the syllabus cautions:

Keep your mind open. Education is in part encountering new ideas, experiences, and emotions. Welcome them, even if they jar with your preconceptions. No man's philosophy is final.

Speaking of taste, avoid the attitude of many who say, 'I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like.' This attitude makes growth impossible. It implies: 'I have reached a certain position in my appreciation of the world (as reflected in art), and I refuse to proceed further.' Humanities 1-2 assumes, on the contrary, that taste can be developed in a vital person, and that it never stops developing. In this course you may encounter ideas and specimens of art that you are not prone to accept because they do not fit the patterns of life and taste that you have come to take for granted. Do not therefore condemn such ideas or works of art. Rather re-examine the patterns of your life and taste to see whether they are worthy of you.

Therefore approach the subject with humility. In a real sense the student — and this includes your instructors — must remain humble before the great idea, the great poem, the great picture, the great symphony. This attitude does not demand the kind of adulation that precludes criticism. It merely calls for the kinds of criticism whose purpose is to seek the truth rather than to fortify a prejudice.

The student, then, must be discouraged from becoming hypercritical — but also from cultivating a characteristic adoration of Western Culture: "My culture, right or wrong." Western Culture has produced some sorry messes of late, and perhaps a candid investigation of its power to produce evil is fully as justified as praise for its many and memorable contributions to the richer life of man. Here again is the problem of the function of tradition: the past must be venerated only so far as it is venerable. Where it has failed, the present and future must break with it. And we are, after all, moulding students who face, not the past, but the present and the future. In our humble office as their teachers — certainly in the humanities — we must encourage in them the open mindedness which alone will enable them to use the tradition to enrich their understanding of the present and to make more clear their vision of the future.

G. Harris Daggett
University of New Hampshire

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